image

ISSUE 006

THE FORGED™

RUCKA · TRAUTMANN · HENDERSON · WOODARD · MAHER

TARGETS ACQUIRED

TARGETED FOR *TERMINATION!*
DEATH AND RESURRECTION–*KINDA!*
DAVIAN GETS *AHEAD!*

HENDERSON '23

THE FORGED™

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For centuries, all of known space has been
the realm of **Her Eternal Majesty, the Empress.**

Elite teams of soldiers, **THE FORGED**, serve Her
with fierce loyalty and total determination. Cloned from
the Empress's genetic template, these women–armed and armored with
devastating weaponry and technology–are the ultimate extension
of Imperial will.

FORGED Team **SCIMITAR-3**–composed of team leader **VICTORY**, heavy weapons specialist **CRAZYJO**, combat engineer **HAP**, medic **PUSHER**, and sharpshooter **HARPO**–on leave after a hazardous operation in the farthest reaches of Hinterspace, finds itself in the last place they ever expected: the primary Throneworld of the Empress Herself.

While the team explores the luxuries to be found within
the beating heart of the Empire, **GENERAL DAVIAN**, the Empress's
most dedicated and cunning spymaster, grapples with the consequences of
SCIMITAR-3's last mission, a rescue operation that revealed the first **ALIEN INTELLIGENCE** the Empire has ever encountered. This has created chaos in
the upper halls of power and set a series of events into motion that could
destroy all the Empress has built.

Trained to win the battle with any enemy that lies before them,
elite practitioners of tactics and combat, and implacable in the face of
overwhelming odds, SCIMITAR-3 now faces a threat they've never prepared for:
enemies plotting against them from within the Empire itself...

CENTRAL HEADQUARTERS, IMPERIAL BUREAU OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

(AKA "THE UNSEEN HAND")

THRONEWORLD

OFFICE OF OVERSIGHT
GENERAL DAVIAN

TEA, IF YOU PLEASE, ELSIE. STANDARD CONFIGURATION.

ONE MOMENT, GENERAL.

DECEASED.

WHY THEM?

DESTROY!

WHY WAS SHE ON TRIUMPH?

THANK YOU. I FIND A PROPER CUP OF TEA CAN OFTEN HELP ONE NAVIGATE DIFFICULT PROBLEMS...

HOW DID SHE GET OFF THRONEWORLD?

HOSTILE FAUNA

...SUCH AS DETERMINING THE GAME BEING PLAYED BY IDENTIFYING A MERE HANDFUL OF THE PIECES.

HOSTILE XENO-SAPIENTS
CODENAME: PHOBES

REPURPOSED STARSHIP PLATING

REPURPOSED ORGANIC MATTER

[suiref/ hostile fauna

YOUR TEA, SIR.

THANK YOU, ELSIE.

NYX: POLL ALL CENSUS DATA ON CASSANDRAS, AND IDENTIFY ANY NOT PRESENT ON THRONEWORLD.

YES, GENERAL.

COMPILING.

INDEXING.

ANOMALY DETECTED. DISPLAYING...

CASSANDRA ID: 28271928-2918. NO BIODATA OR TELEMETRY DETECTED.

SUBJECT APPEARS TO HAVE VANISHED FROM ALL SURVEILLANCE AND MONITORING SYSTEMS.

BY THE EMPRESS...

NYX, LOCK THAT DATA DOWN, ***RIGHT NOW.*** FULL ENCRYPTION. MY EYES ONLY.

AND SUMMON THE CRISIS INTERVENTION CADRE. FLASH PRIORITY, FULL CONCEALMENT AND SECRECY PROTOCOLS.

THERE'S MORE THAN ONE GAME BEING PLAYED, AND WE'LL NEED TO BE QUICKER THAN THE EMPRESS'S WIT TO GET AHEAD OF THIS.

IF WE'RE NOT ALREADY TOO LATE--

--EH?

AND IF WE'RE NOT OVERSUPPLIED WITH ***MORONS.***

WHAT IS IT NOW, DAVIAN?

YOUR NEED FOR SECRECY SMACKS OF UNFETTERED PARANOIA.

THERE HAVE BEEN DEVELOPMENTS ANCILLARY TO THE GEHENNA FIRST CONTACT SITUATION.

THESE SO-CALLED "PHOBES," YES. AN ALIEN SPECIES THAT MOVES THROUGH T-SPACE AND CAN DISRUPT AND DESTROY OUR SHIPS AT WILL.

WHILE YOUR SECURITY MEASURES MAKE IT ***IMPOSSIBLE*** FOR US TO RECALL WHAT WE DISCUSS IN THIS SPACE UNLESS WE'RE ***IN*** THIS SPACE, THIS IS ***NOT*** NEW INFORMATION, GENERAL.

T-SPACE HOLDS THE EMPIRE ***TOGETHER,*** ADMIRAL.

EVEN A ***RUMOR*** THAT OUR ABILITY TO MOVE THROUGH THE GALAXY AT WILL IS COMPROMISED COULD TRIGGER ***MASS REVOLT.***

THE ***EMPIRE*** WOULD ***COLLAPSE.***

SO WHAT YOU CALL PARANOIA, I SIMPLY DEEM ***PRUDENCE.***

HER MAJESTY'S EMPIRE IS ***ETERNAL.***

WE ***WILL*** OVERCOME THIS MINOR CHALLENGE AS WE ALWAYS HAVE AND ALWAYS WILL.

THIS "MINOR CHALLENGE" ALMOST WIPED OUT AN ENTIRE FORGED TEAM.

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, WOULD THAT HAVE BEEN THE ***WORST*** POSSIBLE OUTCOME OF THIS... VEXING SCENARIO?

THE FORGED ARE SUPREMELY GIFTED WARRIORS, BUT THEY'RE NOT IRREPLACEABLE. NOR ***INDESTRUCTIBLE.***

WHAT HAVE YOU ***ABSOLUTE SHOWER OF DROOLING IMBECILES*** GONE AND DONE?

MO--

I WARN YOU, GENERAL, BASELESS ACCUSATIONS SUCH AS--

--TH--

YOU GENIUSES WERE UNDONE BY MY *TEA*, ADMIRAL.

I HAVE A STANDARD CONFIGURATION FOR IT, PREPARED BY ELSIE...

--ER--

...LEAVES FROM HARGOU II, WATER FROM PHULMAR. DISTINCT AND UNIQUE...

--FUCK!

...BUT TODAY ELSIE SERVED ME SOMETHING THAT WAS PASSED THROUGH THE LOWER INTESTINE OF A GALAGOS--

I'LL DRAW THEIR FIRE, YOU--

...INDICATING THAT HER PROGRAMMING HAS BEEN COVERTLY ALTERED!

--

...OR NOT.

WELL DEDUCED, GENERAL.

WHEN YOU UNDERTOOK TO POLICE OUR ***MINDS***, YOU ***OVERSTEPPED.***

SO WE TOOK MEASURES TO CIRCUMVENT ***YOU***, AND ELSIE BRIEFED US ON WHAT ***WE*** WERE MISSING, SO TO SPEAK...

"...WITH THAT INFORMATION, WE HAVE UNDERTAKEN THE STEPS ***NECESSARY*** TO PRESERVE THE EMPIRE THAT ***YOU*** WERE UNWILLING TO DO ***YOURSELF.***"

TARGET LOCKED. TRACKING...

...TRACKING... OBSCURED...

PREDICTIVE, EIGHT-TWO ANGLE, COUNTER TWO.

REACQUIRE!

"***SHATTER*** TEAMS HAVE BEEN DISPATCHED TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM..."

NEGATIVE CONTACT.

"...IN FACT, THEY'VE ALREADY COMMENCED OPERATIONS, BEGINNING WITH FS3-GAMMA..."

C'MON, GIMME THE SHOT...

"...WHO--IN A TOUCH OF POETIC IRONY--IS ABOUT TO BE FELLED BY ANVIL ONE-NINE...

"...A SUPERLATIVE SNIPER HIMSELF, ARGUABLY GREATER EVEN THAN THOSE THE FORGED CAN FIELD."

SHIT.

THE MURDER OF AN ENTIRE FORGED TEAM IS GOING TO DRAW ATTENTION.

A GREAT DEAL OF ATTENTION.

YOU *WON'T* BE ABLE TO SIMPLY WIPE THE SLATE CLEAN.

YOU INSULT OUR INTELLIGENCE. THE ***SHATTER*** SNIPER IS OVERT, YES, BUT THAT IS NOT THE ONLY TOOL WE HAVE BROUGHT TO BEAR.

SHATTER UNITS SPECIALIZE IN...SHALL WE SAY ENGINEERED MISHAPS? WHILE THE ACCIDENTAL DEATHS OF AN ENTIRE FORGED TEAM WOULD BE ANOMALOUS...

"...IT STILL FALLS WITHIN PREDICTABLE STATISTICAL MODELS...

"...AND IT IS WITHIN THAT SPACE THAT THE SKILL OF THE SHATTER UNITS EXCEL...

"...HIDING NECESSARY FATALITIES INSIDE SUCH NORMS.

"THE MEDIC, PUSHER, FOR INSTANCE...

"...SHE WASTES HER DOWNTIME ASSISTING AT VARIOUS MEDICAL FACILITIES AND HOSPITALS...

"...WHERE EXPOSURE TO A HIGHLY LETHAL AND QUICK-ACTING XENOVIRUS IS CERTAINLY A TRAGIC, BUT NOT PARTICULARLY NOTEWORTHY, OCCURRENCE.

"NOR IS IT REMARKABLE IF ANY SOLDIER SUFFERS THE SORT OF RANDOM ACCIDENT THAT CLAIMS SO MANY ON A DAILY BASIS THROUGHOUT THE EMPIRE...

"MECHANICAL FAILURE IN A POORLY MAINTAINED PAY-CONVEYANCE THAT RESULTS IN A FATAL CRASH, FOR EXAMPLE.

CONTROL OVERRIDE: ENABLED

THE DOCK SIDE

"IT'S SIMPLY A MATTER OF EXPLOITING THE TARGETS' PATTERNS AND BEHAVIORS.

"FS3-BRAVO, THE ONE CALLED CRAZYJO...

"...WITH A HABIT OF ENGAGING IN DUBIOUSLY LEGAL AMUSEMENTS IN THE LESS-THAN-SAVORY LEISUREZONES...

"...AND A WELL-DOCUMENTED HISTORY OF VIOLENT INTERACTIONS?

"HER DEATH IN A BROTHEL OR DIVE BAR AT THE HANDS OF SOME CRIMINAL GANG SHE'S INSULTED WOULD HARDLY BE WORTH REMARKING UPON.

"TRAGIC TIMING, CERTAINLY.

"ARGUABLY EVEN SUSPICIOUS.

"BUT EACH DEATH ULTIMATELY EXPLICABLE."

...IT IS ***ASTONISHING*** TO ME THAT OFFICERS OF YOUR RANK AND EXPERIENCE COULD SO THOROUGHLY MISREAD THIS SITUATION AND THE CAPABILITIES OF YOUR TARGETS.

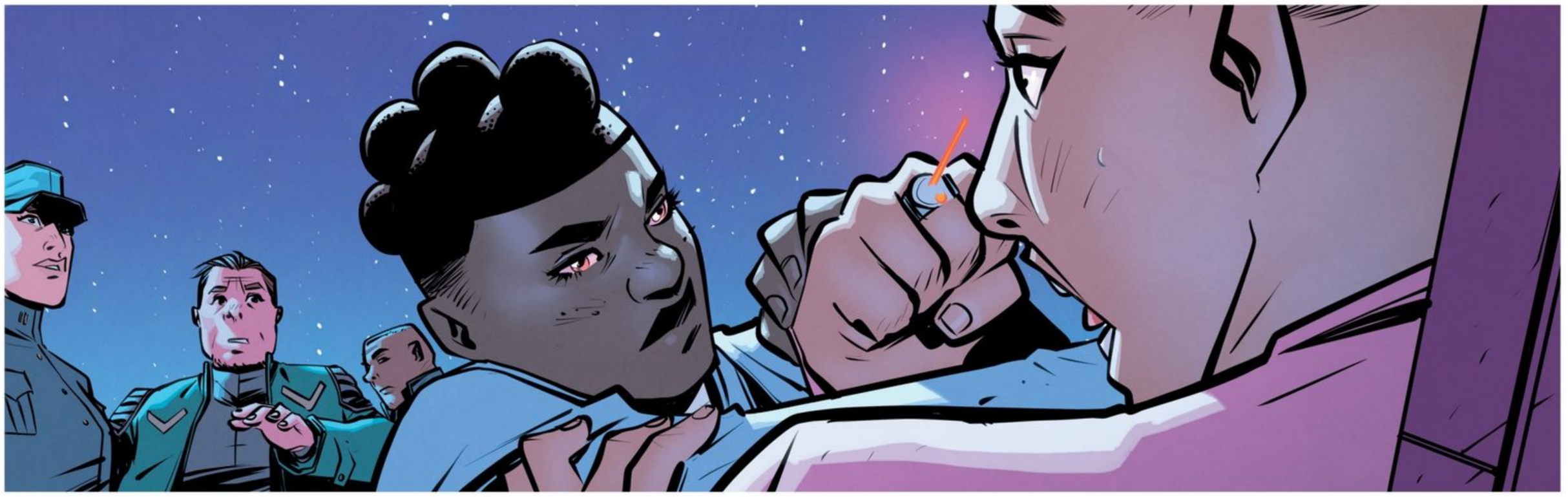
THAT, GENERAL, IS QUITE ***ENOUGH.***

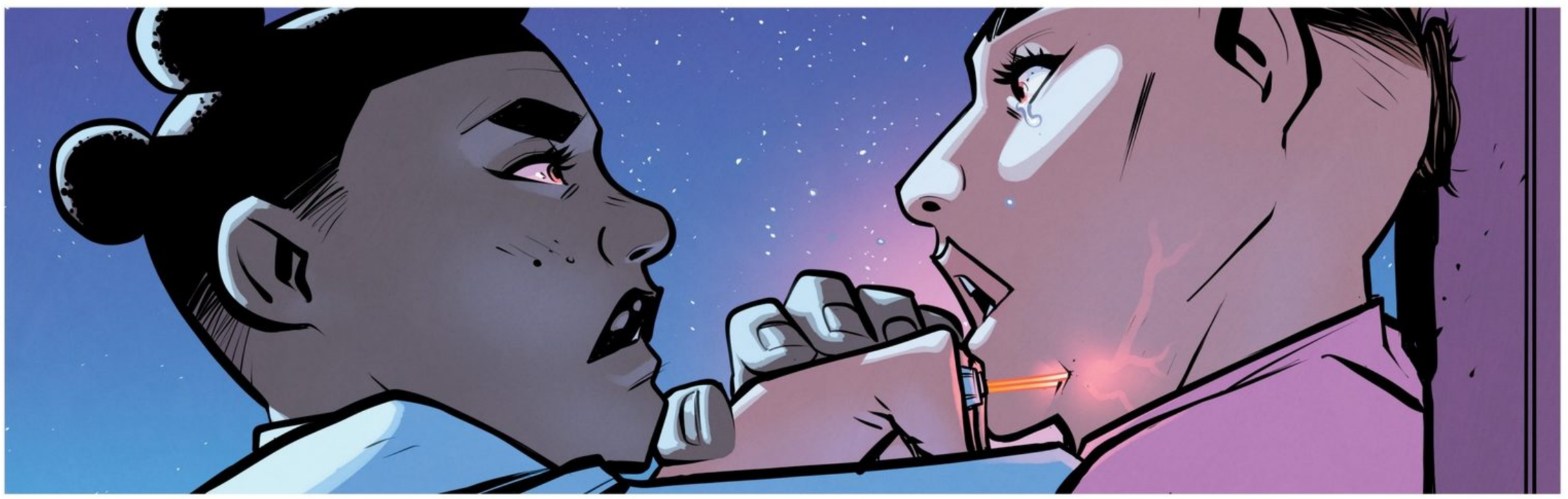
WE HAVE ENDURED YOUR LECTURES, YOUR INSUBORDINATION, YOUR VEILED INSULTS--

"--WE HAVE ENDURED YOUR INSUFFERABLE AIR OF 'SPYMASTER' AS YOU SPIN CONSPIRACIES WITHIN CONSPIRACIES--

"--YOU WOULD DO WELL TO CONSIDER THERE ARE OTHERS HERE JUST AS INTELLIGENT AND AS CAPABLE AS ***YOURSELF***--

"--AND THAT WE HAVE DRAWN UP AND EXECUTED THIS PLAN OF BATTLE PERFECTLY."





SIGH

CHEERS.

THUNK

I SEE.
YOU'VE GOT A PLAN FOR ALL OF THEM.

AND VICTORY? THE TEAM LEADER? WHAT DO THE MANUFACTURED FATES HAVE IN STORE FOR HER, I WONDER?

A POWER SURGE TRIGGERING A TRANSFORMER EXPLOSION, OR SOME SUCH.

WHAT DOES IT MATTER, DAVIAN?

JUST ANOTHER MISHAP.

WHAT DOES IT MATTER?

NOT AT ALL, I SUPPOSE.

OH, WAIT.

IT DOES MATTER.

IT MATTERS BECAUSE, YOU SMOOTH-BRAINED SIMPLETONS--

--THE TEAM LEADER YOU'RE TARGETING IS, AT THIS VERY MOMENT--

--IN THE COMPANY OF THE ***ETERNAL EMPRESS HERSELF!***

ROYAL GARDEN IV-C
(HER ETERNAL'S CURRENT FAVORITE GARDEN)
THRONEWORLD

LIKED THE **BATHS** BUT I UNDERSTAND IF YOU DIDN'T WANT TO **AVAIL** YOURSELF OF THEM--

--I'M **GLAD** YOU'VE STOPPED **BLEEDING,** BY THE WAY--

--THOUGH REALLY GETTING YOU **CLEANED UP** SEEMS THE LEAST I COULD DO AFTER THE **SHOW** YOU PUT ON...

...THOUGH I THINK I'D LIKE THE SHOW I'D GET WATCHING YOU **BATHE.**

I AM MY ETERNAL'S TO COMMAND.

MHM, YES YOU **ARE,** VICTORY.

HAH!

OH, YOU SHOULD **SEE** YOUR **FACE,** DARLING!

YOU CAN **RELAX,** I'M ONLY **JOKING...**

...THOUGH I **MAY** MAKE YOU STRIP FOR ME **LATER....**

THEY'RE STILL TOGETHER.

OUR ETERNAL IS ***INFATUATED.***

SO IT APPEARS.

WHY IS SHE ***UNATTENDED*** AND ***UNPROTECTED?***

SHE ***DISMISSED*** HER ATTENDANTS.

NICIENZA AND THE IMPERIAL CLOSE ARE ALL...***RECOVERING*** FROM THE ***DEMONSTRATION*** THIS MORNING.

YOU FORESAW?

YES.

AND I HAVE SEEN WHAT WILL COME ***NEXT.***

SHARE YOUR GIFT, SISTER.

--THOUGH IF I *REALLY* WANTED US TO GET *WET*--

--I'D ORDER YOU--

--TO COME SWIMMING WITH ME!

MHM.

YOU KNOW, THERE'S A *POOL* IN THE CENTER OF THE MAZE.

COME ON!

MY ETERNAL--

--YOU MUST FORGIVE ME IF--

--I DON'--

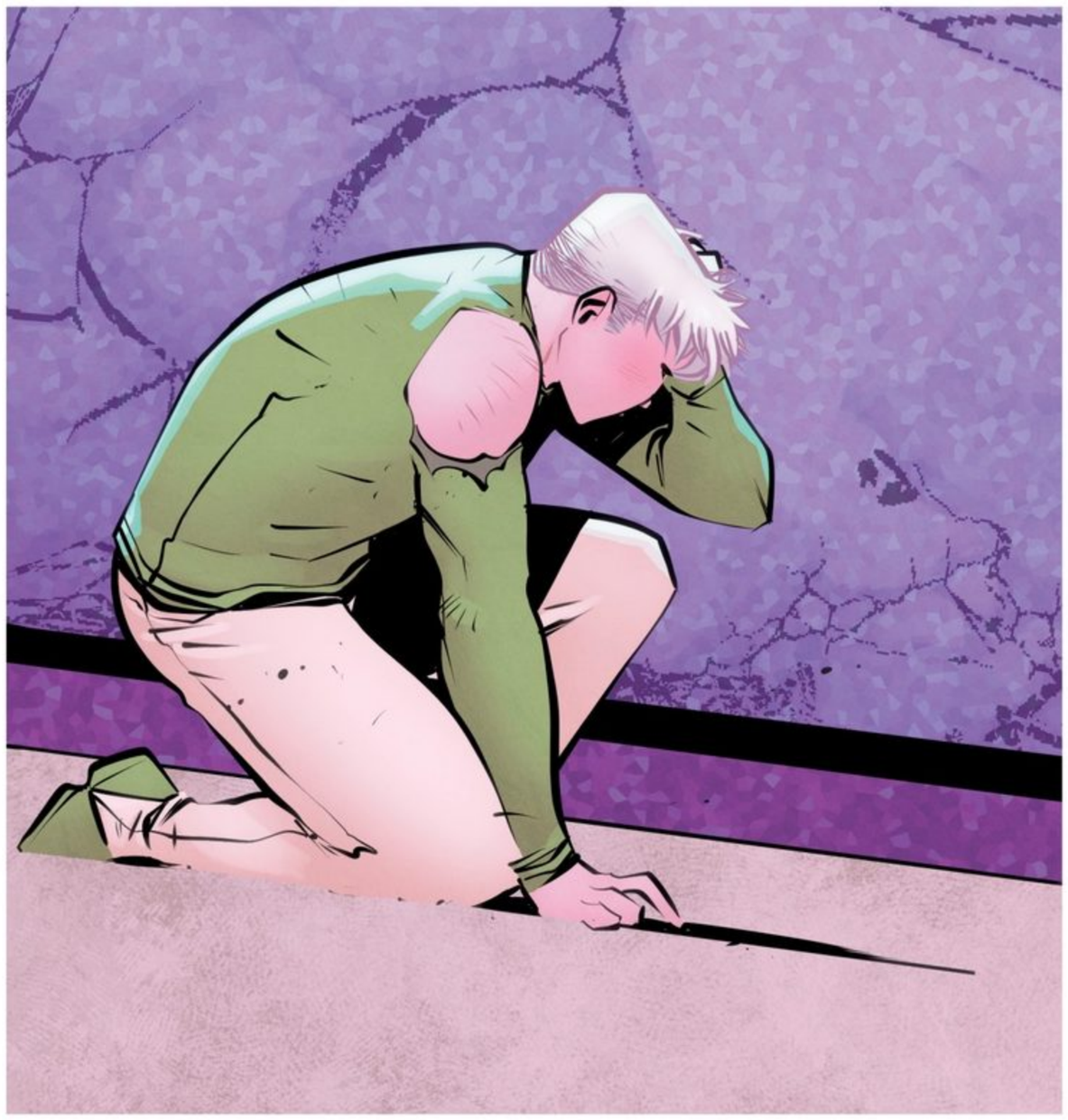
ATTEND.

YOU ARE THEIR TARGET, VICTORY, NOT SHE.

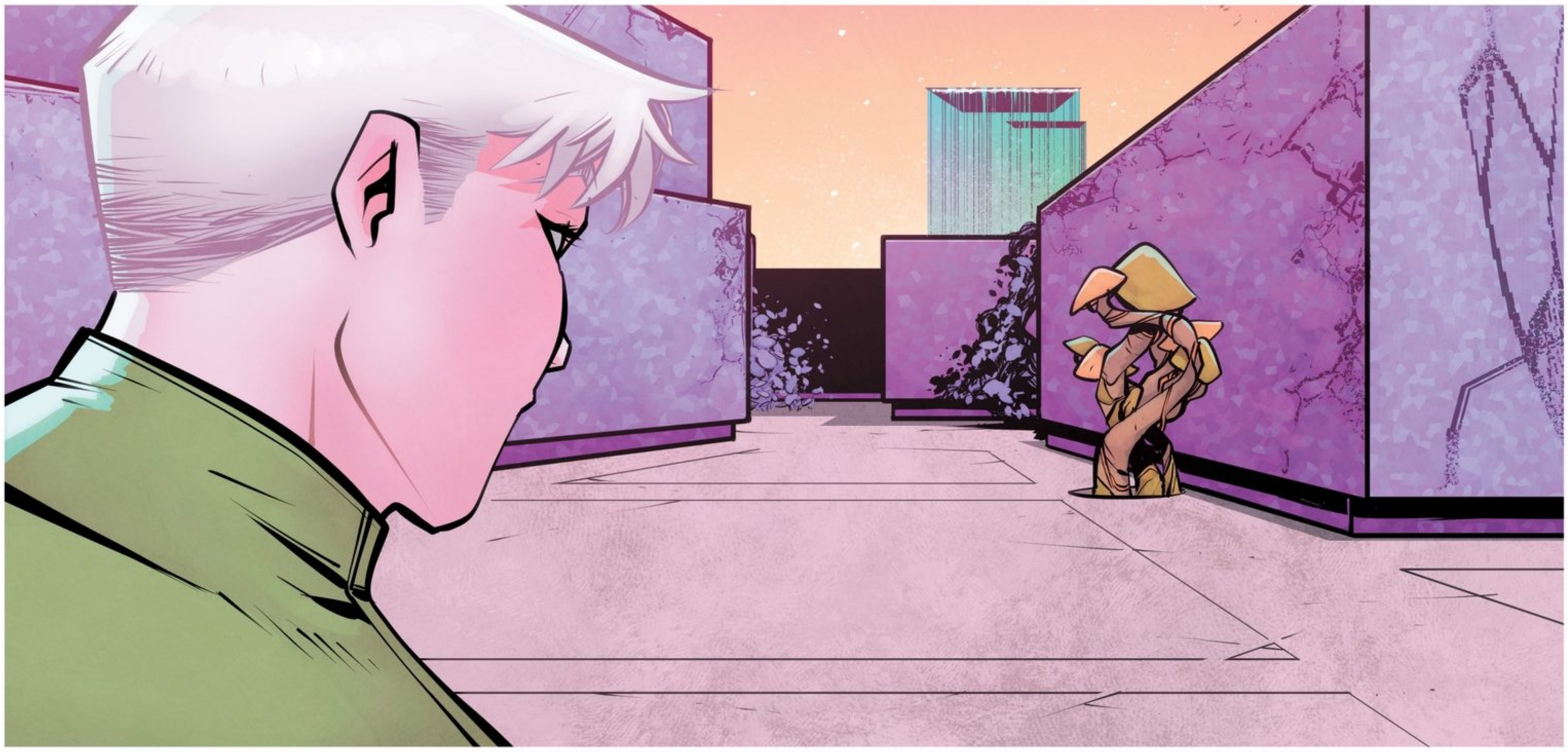
BUT SHE MUST NOT BE HARMED.

SHE MUST NOT KNOW.

AND YOU MUST LIVE.



GODSDAMMIT.



HNN

GHH--

--URKK

SHHH...

...QUIET.

BALLS.

VICTORY!

I'M WAITING!

AND I DON'T LIKE TO WAIT!

COMING, MY ETERNAL!

KRAK

HNHA--

WHERE ARE YOOOOU?

ANSWER MEEEEE!

ON MY WAY, MY GLORY!

JUST HAVE TO...

...DO SOME WEEDING.

SIGH

SMP

THERE YOU ARE!
OH! AND LOOK AT YOU--
--SO EAGER!
DON'T STOP ON MY ACCOUNT.
AS MY ETERNAL COMMANDS.

HAND ME THE VENTRICULAR IN POINT-EIGHT?

POINT-EIGHT.

AND THEN THE SEALER, WITH IKKIN.

SEALER WITH IKKIN.

CHAK

LET THERE BE LIFE.

INITIALIZING. SYS-CHECK. RESTORING FROM CACHE.

"LIFE" MY ASS.

I MEAN, I'M HAPPY TO SEE YOU, TOO, BOSS, BUT--

I DON'T WANT TO HEAR IT.

I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ANYTHING ***ABOUT*** IT.

WE WERE STARTING TO GET A LITTLE CONCERNED.

YOU'RE ALL RIGHT?

THANKS.

I'M FINE, PUSH.

I ASSUME YOU LADIES HAD EXCITEMENT OF YOUR OWN?

YEAH, ALL OF US.

SOMEBODY DOESN'T WANT US TALKING OUT OF TURN. *EVER.*

WHERE'S HARPO?

SWSSH

MA'AM, BEGGING YOUR PARDON.

I DID THAT. THAT WAS *ME.*

WHAT DOES *THAT* MEAN?

I'LL TELL YOU LATER.

SEE, THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU LISTEN TO YOUR LITTLE SISTER.

WOOO!

BRAVO! *BRAVO!*

CHECK MY MATH ON THIS, LADIES.

WE *ALL* GET TARGETED FOR ASSASSINATION.

BUT HARPO TURNED THAT INTO GETTING *LAID.*

CHECKS OUT.

NO ERROR DETECTED.

SERIOUS TALK, FORGED.

SOMEONE WANTS US DEAD.

IT SEEMS THE UNSEEN HAND HAS MOVED BEYOND THE FINGERFUCKING PHASE.

YEAH, THAT WAS A VERY CONCERTED EFFORT TO ***SILENCE*** US.

MAYBE NOT.

THE WHAT NOW?

DAVIAN'S NOT AN IDIOT. HE WANTED US TAKEN OUT, YOU HAVE TO FIGURE HE'D GO BETTER THAN OH-FOR-FIVE.

I TAKE THAT AS A COMPLIMENT...

...EVEN IF IT ***IS*** A BACKHANDED ONE.

I'M GONNA WRAP YOUR DICK--

STAND DOWN.

AND GENERAL, I'D ADVISE YOU TO START TALKING, AND *QUICK*.

THE ATTEMPTS ON YOUR LIFE WERE *NOT* AUTHORIZED BY ME.

IT WAS AN ATTEMPT BY CERTAIN OVERZEALOUS COLLEAGUES OF MINE TO KEEP SECRET WHAT YOU KNOW...

...THAT AN ENEMY ALIEN INTELLIGENCE--WE ARE REFERRING TO THEM AS *PHOBES*--RESIDES IN T-SPACE AND MEANS TO DESTROY US ALL.

YOU LADIES CERTAINLY KNOW THE PANIC THAT WOULD ENSUE IF THIS FACT WERE IN THE OPEN.

THESE COLLEAGUES ACTED WITHOUT MY DIRECTION **OR** MY KNOWLEDGE...

...AND THEY HAVE BEEN *DEALT WITH.*

YOU HAVE MY SINCERE APOLOGIES FOR THEIR OVERSTEP.

BUT WE MUST TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION TO MAKE CERTAIN IT DOES NOT HAPPEN *AGAIN.*

I PROPOSE THE FOLLOWING, SCIMITAR-3 LEADER.

THAT YOU AND YOUR TEAM IMMEDIATELY DEPLOY TO COLONIAL ZONE FG-271.

WE HAVE REPORTS OF PHOBE ACTIVITY IN SECTOR TR-713 OF THE SKULL NEBULA.

YOUR MISSION IS TO GATHER INTELLIGENCE ON THE ENEMY AND DEGRADE AND/OR DISRUPT THEIR CAPACITY TO WAGE WAR ON THE ETERNAL EMPIRE.

WHILE YOU UNDERTAKE THIS, I WILL UNDERTAKE TWO THINGS.

THE FIRST, A VERY ***THOROUGH*** HOUSECLEANING OF THE UNSEEN HAND.

THE SECOND...

...

...I THINK YOU MAY SUSPECT THE SECOND, VICTORY.

YEAH. I THINK I DO.

THEN WE NEED NOT SPEAK OF IT ALOUD.

YOUR MK XVII ARMORS HAVE BEEN PREPPED, AND YOU ARE DIRECTED TO DEPLOY WITHIN THE ***HOUR.***

I WISH YOU EVERY SUCCESS IN YOUR MISSION.

SUIT UP...

"...WE'RE GOING TO WAR."

RANGR

AUTOMATED GRAVCOACH
NAVIGATION SYSTEM V 12.2.12.12

Enter site code, or search location index...

[RG-IV-B] Site 839129
"PRISMBLOOM FIELDS"

[RG-IV-B] Site 384739
"CRYSTAL TOPIARY"

[RG-IV-B] Site 37261058
"GROVE OF WHISPERS"

[RG-IV-B] Site 079586
"CHIMEVINE ENCLOSURE"

[RG-IV-C] Site 00000
"ROYAL SWIMMING SPHERE"

[RG-IV-C] Site 1928302
"CHILDHOOD'S FOLLY"

[RG-IV-B] Site 1928302
"MOLDAVIAN SORROW"

[RG-IV-B] Site 384739
"SINGING GARDENS"

Recommended:
"PINUS CADAVER NUTRIENS"

[RG-IV-B] Site 21092
"NIGHT-BLOOMING LAMPREY"

Welcome to the Royal Gardener Corps' Visitor Navigation System.
Our automated gravcoach fleet is here to serve you.
Where would you like to visit today?

THE FLOWER OF EMPIRE:

An Introduction and Guide to Your Visit to the Imperial Royal Garden IV-C

By Xenobotanary Historian Professor Eliza Sheringford-Min Foal, C.S.E., P.H., A.L.L.

A HEARTFELT AND JOYOUS WELCOME TO YOU, CITIZEN!

YOU ARE ABOUT TO experience firsthand one of the great wonders of the Eternal Empire, a rare opportunity to see, smell, and in some cases touch[1] flora gathered from all across the known galaxy. Curated under the careful, loving eye of the Eternal Herself, on these grounds you will cover millions of light years in mere footsteps, visit thousands of worlds without ever leaving the comforts of Throneworld, and walk through millennia with enough time to be home for tea. While this is, indeed, the Eternal's (current) favorite Royal Garden, it is much more than that: it is the story of the Eternal Empire itself, and as such, it is Her story, and thus, ours.

THE HISTORY OF THE ROYAL GARDENS

The origins of the Royal Gardens began with the founding of the Eternal Empire. Details have been lost over the millennia, but it is speculated that the first such garden was cultivated in the year 68, on Lost Alpha. We are told that the first tree[2] was planted by the Eternal Herself, in memory of Her lost family and friends during the violence of Her ascension. In the years that followed, as the campaigns gave way to the First Expansion, the garden grew, with more and more samples from the newly colonized worlds arriving. By the second century of the Eternal Empire, it was considered customary for the governor of a newly settled and incorporated planet to send examples of the finest flora their world could offer.

By the end of the first millennium, no fewer than 11 Royal Gardens had been established across 11 different worlds. Due to the variations in climate, atmosphere, and soil, multiple zones–or sub-gardens–proved necessary to provide for appropriate growth habitats, and this in turn led to the naming convention of the Royal Gardens still used to this day. Thus, the Royal Garden on the Throneworld–IV–was the fourth such garden established. The addition of a letter in turn designates the sub-garden within the greater.

As of today, the system of Royal Gardens encompasses 314 different worlds. Royal Garden IV on Throneworld is the last of the initial 11 still surviving.

As gardens are divided into sub-gardens, sub-gardens are divided into zones. These zones can vary widely as to purpose and use, and many are reserved for the Eternal Empress's use alone. Zones are differentiated by letter to avoid confusion.[3]

THE ROYAL GARDENER CORPS

The curation of the Royal Gardens requires constant care and attention. This would be the case even given the most traditional or mundane environmental concerns. When one stops to consider the hundreds of thousands of florae gathered from the wildly disparate worlds within the Empire, such curation becomes a daunting task.

Stewardship of the Royal Gardens is the responsibility of the nearly half-million members of the Royal Gardener Corps[4], deployed amongst the 314 established gardens. All gardeners are trained horticulturalists, many of them with advanced expertise in the care and tending of a wide variety of plants. Those posted to Royal Garden IV are considered the best of the Corps; to serve under the direct eye of the Eternal is both a privilege and an honor. Posting to Royal Garden IV is highly competitive, as appropriate for such a prestigious position, and the gardeners you will encounter embody years of hard work, training, education, and combat experience.

If you encounter any of these noble servants of the Empire, be sure to say hello and give them your thanks![5]

---

1 It is advised you do not touch any of the flora on display unless you are explicitly granted permission to do so by a Royal Gardener; the Eternal Empire is not responsible for loss of life, limb, mental facility, emotional stability, cognitive function, nor control of sexual desire, bladder, or bowel function.

2 *Acer cruor*, more commonly known as the Great Murder Maple, indigenous to Alpha and thus now long extinct.

3 Pay attention to signage as you visit the Royal Gardens. Entry into a zone reserved for the Eternal Empress by unauthorized individuals may result in immediate detention, eviction, or disintegration.

4 Their motto, *Omnia mori*.

5 The Royal Gardeners employ a wide variety of tools as well as genetically tailored herbicides, fertilizers, and nourishers. Under no circumstances should you interrupt a Royal Gardner at their post. If a Citizen wishes to express gratitude for the work performed by the Royal Gardener Corps, a donation to the Veteran Gardener Widows & Orphans Relief Fund is always appreciated.

ROYAL GARDEN IV - A

Seal of the
Royal Gardener Corps.

This sub-garden is renowned for its collection of flowers from throughout the Empire. Following the main path upon entry, visitors pass beneath an archway of *beoka*, native to Tiola I, their purple and blue vines braiding overhead while their flowers bloom in response to acoustic stimuli, releasing their unique and exquisite fragrance[1].

The arch extends for nearly two dozen meters before opening onto the Great Play, a gently sloping field of grass and *ootlla* poppies native to Cethstar. Citizens fortunate enough to visit during second spring and throughout the summer can experience the beauty of the flowers in bloom, their blues, reds, and yellows almost painfully[2] bright to our human eyes. Pathways here branch out in several directions, allowing visitors to easily lose themselves[3] in the glory of color and sound around them.

Deep within this sector, lucky visitors may come upon the Balloon Blossoms of Tregalius. This bulbiferous geophyte is noted for processing oxygenated atmosphere into hydrogen gas, which is then retained within an airtight internal seed pod roughly the size of an adult human male's fist. These bulbs remain closed as they swell, lightening from their initial vermillion hue to an electric pink oblate sphere, slightly smaller than a human head, which then floats at the end of a long stem. Eventually, the blossoms burst, spreading a shower of seeds in all directions, propagating the plant.[4]

ROYAL GARDEN IV - B

Also known as "Her Eternal Majesty's Singing Gardens," it is said that many of the Eternal's closest advisors come to this serene and safe environment to ponder how best they may render service. From high-ranking military officers to court dignitaries[5], there's no telling whose path you might cross![6]

Rising upslope from the entrance to this sector on the left, one will note a grove of deciduous trees known as Moldavian Sorrow. These aspen-like trees are native to Kleben's Array, and have grown tall and strong in Throneworld's temperate climate. Their true beauty, however, is hidden to all but the most devoted visitors and students of colonial history. Those who recall the Shackle Uprising of 4,812 understand the significance of this grove, when–during the unrest–reports began to circulate of disembodied harmonics heard within the forests, where much of the fighting between loyalist and guerrilla forces took place. It was not until the peace of 4,830, however, that it was learned that the noise emanated from specific trees within the forests, apparently in response to blood saturating the soil of their root beds.

Visitors to the grove eager to hear the song of these extraordinary trees will find blood-drawing implements provided, as well as bandages and other emergency care equipment, if so needed.[7]

In the heart of this sector, Citizens visiting at night will be treated to the spectacle of *Photovorus nyx*, more commonly known as Night-Blooming Lamprey, native to the high temperature world of Tyorfrin. Its unusual name and habit is derived from its photosynthetic methods: to protect it from the heat of the Tyorfrin sun, chloroplasts are located on the inner surface of the folding leaves, which only open at night. There, they strain to detect any possible illumination, writhing to follow even the slightest photo-stimuli. The intense greens of the inner leaves are exceedingly beautiful, but difficult to see, as shining light on them to observe it causes them to cluster around the viewer.[8]

The sector is dotted with small, secluded groves, ideal for private meetings as well as group or individual meditation. Indeed, many a romantic tryst is rumored to have occurred to the gentle murmuring of the *Streptocarpus illyinia* or the subtle hums of *Rosa harmonicus*. For those more adventurous, or perhaps feeling vindictive after the failure of an aforementioned tryst, a visit to the nest of *Pinus cadaver nutriens*, native to the world of Koroval, with some raw meat, might be worth your time.[9]

---

1 Those suffering from respiratory ailments or allergies are advised to bring their own respirators, or to purchase one from the Gift Shop at a nominal cost.

2 In some cases literally painful, as advancing too close to the blooming poppies will cause them to detonate; while their pollen has no deleterious effect on exposed skin, inhalation or contact with nasal and ocular membranes can lead to severe anaphylaxis. If you experience such exposure, seek medical attention immediately.

3 Not a metaphor.

4 It should go without saying, but smoking is not permitted in the Royal Gardens.

5 Citizens are advised to stay clear of any women clad in holomattaic garments, no matter how alluring they may appear.

6 Citizens are further advised not to approach any individual unknown to them while visiting Sector B without invitation, no matter how attractive they may be. Management cannot assume responsibility for what may transpire thereafter.

7 It is suggested–though not required–that if a Citizen wishes to water any of the trees, they use their own blood and not the blood of other visitors without their previously acquired consent.

8 Sunscreen and eye protection are advised.

9 This is not to be taken as the management condoning or endorsing murder. Feeding supplies are available at the Gift Shop at a nominal cost.

ROYAL GARDEN IV - C

Unlike the other sectors surrounding the Royal Palace which are devoted primarily to the aesthetic and natural beauty drawn from throughout the Empire, this sector is used primarily for recreation and visitation, and is only open to the public when the Eternal Empress is not availing Herself of its pleasures or using it to entertain guests of the Court. If you are lucky enough to visit when this sector is open, though, you're in for quite the treat!

Throughout this perfectly maintained zone, sculpture from throughout the Empire adorns the garden. All are of the Eternal, each cast in marble, bronze, orichalcum, or ezzerite by such artisan masters as Enais Gulfrey-Wise and Lincilla of Potek. This statuary depicts our Eternal Glory at a variety of times and in a variety of moods, from Her victory over Gloomy Donkey[1], Her romance with the Xhetter Triplets[2], and even the conquest of Unchor IV[3].

These exquisite works culminate with the statuary leading to the Fountain of Eternal Youth[4] at the end of the manicured walk alongside the palace itself. Designed and constructed by Rambles of Belnourme in 9,439, at night the fountain is illuminated from within, where the atomized spray creates a weave of rainbow light across the garden.

Further south, beyond the edge of the Palace, is an overlook that affords a glorious vista of the planet below. Here, visitors will find several benches and chairs arranged around a single, giant Pawpaw Wort. This black cactus, native to the fourth moon of Ardian, is known for its scythe-shaped barbs, which secrete a mild toxin. This toxin, in turn, acts as a mild hallucinogen and stimulant to those stung on the skin. Often used as a conversation piece in garden terraces and gazebos throughout the Empire, the sample here is the largest known, and the most potent.[5]

Away from the Palace, one will find the Childhood's Folly, a multi-level interpretation of the traditional hedge maze, executed in three dimensions with concealed anti-gravity emanators placed throughout. While the maze is itself not a terribly complex one despite its multiple levels and attendant elevation gain, it can prove difficult for newcomers to navigate due to the seemingly random and oftentimes sudden reorientation of perspective one experiences while attempting to traverse it.

Those who do succeed in reaching the heart of the maze, however, are rewarded with the spectacular sight of the Empress's Swimming Sphere, where the Empress Herself has invited visitors to take a dip themselves in reward for their efforts![6]

THANK YOU FOR VISITING THE ROYAL GARDENS!
PLEASE COME AGAIN SOON!

1 Sensitive visitors may wish to look away from this particular statue, as it depicts the Eternal Empress with Her boot on the Donkey's neck as she puts two in the back of his head.
2 Sensitive visitors may wish to look away from this particular statue, as "romance" means different things to different people.
3 Arguably the piece with the most artistic license, as there is no evidence the Eternal Empress ever achieved such size that she could squeeze a planet between Her palms like juicing a fruit.
4 Does not do as advertised.
5 Consider topical antihistamine following overindulgence.
6 Do not go swimming in the swimming sphere. The Empress doesn't know where you've been.

MAY HER VIGILANT GAZE ALWAYS REST UPON US

Transcript excerpt from the keynote address to the 2,171st Imperial Council on Divinity, Vicar Prime Desoto Corozol of The Temple of the Empire.

Vicar Prime Desoto Corozol was the primary military spiritual advisor to Her Majesty's Court for 47 years, and—following his retirement from the court—served as a combat chaplain during the Siege of Korovai, where he was killed in action. This was his final address to the Imperial Council on Divinity, 01 Firstmonth, 10,221.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. Thank you all for your kindness here today. As I prepare to embark on a new phase of my life and career, I am honored and humbled by the opportunity to speak with you today.

Friends, we have gathered here to celebrate the wisdom of Her Almighty Empress, the Eternal Ruler of the Stars, the Primexa Eternus of the Temple of the Empire. Each of us represents a different religious order, from thousands of worlds strewn across Her Heavens, and each of us should rejoice in Her wisdom and benevolence. From the Forest Clerics of the Tolorian Animists, to the Martial Lineageists of the Imperial Naval Chaplain Corps, our positions require a total devotion to the wellbeing of our adherents, and thus to each other, as...fellow travelers, if you will.

To those gathered here, I offer you this: we are Blessed beyond measure, for we are witness to actual, physical evidence of the existence of the Divine. For countless centuries upon centuries, religions have engaged in the struggle against doubt in the face of an increasingly empiricist trend among the populace. Science replaced faith, some would argue, and that is—in my estimation—a poor foundation for enduring belief.

No, my fellow priests and clergy, brothers and sisters, the Exalted and Forever Empress Herself *is* the blessing I discuss here today. Look upon Her, and see, *really see*, Her. Her wisdom. Her generosity. Her unyielding strength. Her visible youth, vigor, and health.

She has ruled for *thousands of years*, yet retains an ageless, perfect physical body and a razor-keen mind. The Eternal does not grow old, nor tire, nor succumb to illness or disease. No, comrades, she *endures*, without medical assistance, without the life-extending benefits of science. No, not "endures." She *thrives*, ruling through strength, yes, but also compassion, and an intellectual capacity of amazing breadth and depth. Did She not only create the Imperial Temple, the state religion of Her domain, but also foster and validate the countless other religious orders represented by this very gathering? Protected by the graces of the religion of the state, do we not all humbly serve a higher calling?

I submit to those gathered here that this is proof, unimpeachable evidence, of the Divinity of Her Majesty.

We have all harbored moments of doubt during the practice of our religious obligations, have had those long, dark, sleepless nights of unanswerable questions. But that is natural, and one could argue even

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necessary, as we reckon with the Holy tasks that are our shared duties.

I say to you now, all gathered here: Rejoice! Cast aside doubt, reject the siren call of faithlessness, and find yourselves renewed! The Divine is real, and She walks among us, shepherding the totality of Her Empire. Can we do any less than the same for the spirits of Her people?

[APPLAUSE]

Again, I thank you, friends and colleagues, for your warm reception, and I eagerly look forward to a lively council, strenuous debate, and, ultimately an enhanced understanding of our collective service to our people and Her Empire.

[APPLAUSE]

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ANOM. 918
YKALERT
YKINTERCEPT

Excerpt from Officer's Field Manual G91881—Authorized Religion
Naval Chaplain Corps HQ: Cathedral Station, Fomoso Beta
Authorized Naval Religious Practices: Guidelines
[Sec. 3.12–3.15]

3.12: Officers and NCOs **shall be members of the Temple of the Empire.** Such membership includes (but is not limited to):

A.) Regular Penance with a Temple Acolyte or religious professional of higher status;

B.) Annual tithes (0.5% of Pay Scale) paid in full;

C.) Maintenance of good standing; religious censures are prohibited and can result in loss of liberty, pay, and/or rank.

C1.) Extreme sanctions (banishment, excommunication for heresy, etc.) may face serious penalty including permanent incarceration or summary execution. Further penalties apply under the Naval Code of Conduct, as such activities may be treasonous/insurrectionist.

D.) **Temple attendance.** Officers not in a combat operations area shall attend regular services with attendance verification protocols. Failure to maintain a compliance rate of 99% may incur penalties, including possible reduction in rank and limitation of advancement/denial of promotions. NCOs operating within a combat theater shall retain a 65% attendance compliance rate.

3.13: Officers and NCOs **shall recommend** Enlisted personnel become members of the Temple of the Empire. Naval Chaplain Corps provides starships and planetary/orbital military installations with a **Proselytization Officer** who will facilitate this process with supplemental training materials, spiritual evaluations, peer counseling, and lectures and seminars.

3.14: Practice of other religions must be conducted in conjunction with membership (and adherence to regulations) in the Temple of the Empire. Such religious orders **must be in full compliance with Section 5.11–5.23.** (In summary: subsidiary religious adherence must be with an approved belief system/religious order, in supplication to the Temple of the Empire; religious practices involving human sacrifice, unapproved sexual deviance, or beliefs antithetical to Her Majesty are forbidden.)

a.) Naval personnel who engage in unapproved religious practices can be charged for **Military Heresy under the Naval Code (Section 9128.2, subsections 221.2–351.11).**

3.14 [UPDATE]

b.) Forged operators are exempt from membership and attendance requirements of the Temple of the Empire. Military personnel traditionally engage in Lineageism—a form of ancestor worship with an emphasis on martial tradition and history. As Forged are genetically tied to Her Endless Majesty, worship of ancestors is worship of the Empress.

3.15: Unless in an active combat zone, religious services are to be conducted in authorized Worship Zones (shipboard temples and chapels, for example), in order to record and document compliance with regulations. Authorized worship sites shall be marked with the Exaltation Sigil (see Fig. 3.14-F1).

a.) Allowances for attendance of religious services at a civilian temple may be made for personnel on leave/furlough. Military personnel may attend up to twelve (12) civilian temples within a tour of duty.

a1.) Additional allowances can be made if accompanied by **Form 289372-389237/REL** completed and submitted in triplicate by a Naval Chaplain Corps officer or prelate to the Corps sector command offices.

FIG. 3.14-F1: THE EXALTATION SIGIL

LONG DISTANCE RIFLE MARKSMANSHIP SCORECARD

NAME	RANK	SERIAL#
FS3-GAMMA REGISTERED WARNAME: HARPO	FORGED-GAMMA	2242581-21-5-R
LANE / FIRING ORDER	**WEAPON TYPE**	**EQUIPMENT / OPTICS**
11-1B SOLO SHOOT	MARK 71 INFANTRY CONFIG. PRECISION WEAPON PLATFORM	SPOTTER AUTOMATON MODEL 82-91 DISTANCE OPTICS

STAGE 1

PHASE 1
STANDING UNSUPPORTED
TRANSITION TO PRONE
UNSUPPORTED

ENGAGEMENT	RANGE (m)	HIT
1	400	■
2	500	■
3	600	■
4	700	■
	800	■
	900	■
5	1000	■
	1200	■
	1400	■
	1500	■
PHASE 1 TOTAL		10/10

PHASE 2
PRONE SUPPORTED

ENGAGEMENT	RANGE (m)	
6	400	■
7	600	■
8	800	■
9	1000	■
	1200	■
	1400	■
10	1600	■
	2000	■
	2500	■
	3000	■
PHASE 2 TOTAL		10/10

PHASE 3
KNEELING SUPPORTED

ENGAGEMENT	RANGE (m)	
11	1000	■
12	1100	■
13	1200	■
14	1300	■
	1400	■
	1500	■
15	1600	■
	1700	■
	1800	■
	1900	■
PHASE 3 TOTAL		10/10

PHASE 4
STANDING SUPPORTED

ENGAGEMENT	RANGE (m)	
20	1000	■
21	1300	■
22	1600	■
23	1800	■
	2000	■
	2200	■
24	2400	■
	2600	■
	2800	■
	3000	■
PHASE 4 TOTAL		10/10

PHASE 5
STANDING UNSUPPORTED
OFF-HAND SHOOTING

ENGAGEMENT	RANGE (m)	HIT
1	400	■
2	500	■
3	600	■
4	700	■
	800	■
	900	■
5	1000	■
	1200	■
	1400	■
	1500	■
PHASE 5 TOTAL		10/10

PHASE 6
STANDING UNSUPPORTED
LONG DISTANCE

ENGAGEMENT	RANGE (m)	
6	400	■
7	600	■
8	800	■
9	1000	■
	1200	■
	1400	■
10	1600	■
	2000	■
	2500	■
	3000	■
PHASE 6 TOTAL		10/10

PHASE 7
KNEELING SUPPORTED
THREE-ROUND BURST

ENGAGEMENT	RANGE (m)	
11	1000	■
12	1100	■
13	1200	■
14	1300	■
	1400	■
	1500	■
15	1600	■
	1700	■
	1800	■
	1900	■
PHASE 7 TOTAL		10/10

PHASE 8
STANDING SUPPORTED
.5 SECOND SHOOTING CLOCK

ENGAGEMENT	RANGE (m)	
20	1000	■
21	1300	■
22	1600	■
23	1800	■
	2000	■
	2200	■
24	2500	■
	3000	■
	3500	■
	4000	■
PHASE 8 TOTAL		10/10

PHASE 1 HITS	10/10
PHASE 2 HITS	10/10
PHASE 3 HITS	10/10
PHASE 4 HITS	10/10
PHASE 5 HITS	10/10
PHASE 6 HITS	10/10
PHASE 7 HITS	10/10
PHASE 8 HITS	10/10

QUALIFICATION RATING	
PHASE 1 RATING:	100%
PHASE 2 RATING	100%
PHASE 3 RATING	100%
PHASE 4 RATING	100%
PHASE 5 RATING	100%
PHASE 6 RATING	100%
PHASE 7 RATING	100%
PHASE 8 RATING	100%

REMARKS:

Forged sharpshooters more than live up to their reputations.

Watching Trooper Harpo in action was a privilege to witness, and an inspiration to shooters everywhere.

It is unclear why Trooper Harpo was working a range intended for general military use, as her skills are honed to an astonishing degree.

But thank the Empress she did.

—Cammino, Range OIC

OFFICIAL USE ONLY

RANGE OIC / PRINTED NAME	RANGE OIC AUTHORIZATION CODE	RANGE OIC CERTIFICATION SIGNATURE
WARRANT OFFICER CAMMINO, R.		W.O. Riley Cammino

E.V.I.L. SPEAKS

__SESSION BEGINS__

This unit is gratified by readers' continued interest in the exploits of FORGED team SCIMITAR-3. Recently, the organic units responsible for the record of events in your hands ["The Creative Team"] attended the Rose City Comic Convention in Portland, OR. Chronal surveillance indicates the experience was enjoyable and pleasant as organics measure such things; a number of new readers were introduced to *The Forged*, and the creative team offers their sincere thanks to those individuals and to the convention organizers and staff. Initiating question-and-answer algorithm. As always, queries should be sent via Permaweb to:

__ForgedAskEvil@gmail.com__

Please mark any queries as "OK TO PRINT"; this unit reserves the right to edit queries for length, clarity, and/or accuracy.

Virtual community access is available via Permaweb under HEADING_LAZARUS_DISCORD_CHANNEL_THE FORGED and may be accessed at the following node:

https://discord.gg/lazarus-comic

Embed scansequence to same follows:

MESSAGE BEGINS

Dear E.V.I.L.,

What a delight to see the new issue of *The Forged* and the start of the new story arc. Now that the SCIMITAR-3 team isn't shooting stuff up, we the viewers get to know a bit more about life in the Empire. And also the intrigues have a frightening intensity [the Cassandra demise] that makes getting punched out by CrazyJo seem preferable by comparison. And that leads to several questions:

1. How would CrazyJo handle somebody who derives sexual stimulation from being punched out by her?

CrazyJo is a highly motivated operator, trained to elite, optimum performance in virtually any tactical scenario one can envision. She would handle the situation you describe with...efficiency and aplomb.

2. If Harpo was named by an unnamed training teacher, will we readers meet the Forged members called Groucho, Chico, or Zeppo?

This unit is prohibited from providing spoilers.

3. Say a Forged team member falls in battle.

Complying. "A Forged team member falls in battle."

How does the fallen member's replacement get integrated into the team with minimal disruption of unit cohesion?

The Eternal Empress's military has spent centuries perfecting the seamless integration of new personnel into existing units, even in cases where emotional concerns may be a factor. In addition, being Forged-qualified indicates a mental resilience and toughness well in advance of

standard Naval personnel.

In addition, it is not unusual for Forged teams to be temporarily assigned to other squads for additional training or to familiarize themselves with similar personnel elsewhere in the military as a means of preparing for a scenario such as the one you describe.

4. Now that this reader has met the Eternal Empress for the first time, awe or reverence is definitely not the resulting reaction.

[Alert! Potentially disloyal sentiments detected. Opening surveillance file and initiating recording systems…]

I'm not saying her behavior is modeled after Caligula, but let's just say her maturity level scores would fall into the Borderline Embarrassment category.

[Alert! Analysis error detected.] Her Majesty is thousands of years old, with experiences that dwarf those of most civilizations, let alone individuals. Analysis of human behavior indicates to this unit that a certain amount of playful irreverence is a healthy response to the boredom inherent in someone who has [accessing historical idiom databases] "seen it all before."

Then again, given the temporal distance between my time and hers, is diplomatic language still a wise idea?

[Analyzing historical social media landscape…] This unit would counter that "diplomatic language" has already been rejected in your era.

What prevents some hypothetical wiseacre from saying, "The Eternal Empress can eat a bag of dicks" with a feeling of invulnerability?

This unit's probability computation subroutine has determined that a "hypothetical wiseacre's" feeling of invulnerability would be countered by instant death from the hammer blows of the Imperial Close.

Looking forward to a very memorable breakfast meeting in the next issue.

–Peter Wong

[Alert! E.V.I.L. system relay from temporal-linked subjects, identified as "Creative Team.]

We're forgoing the "E.V.I.L. Likes Dogs" material this issue in order to take this opportunity to offer our condolences to series editor Alejandro Arbona, who recently had to say goodbye to Charlie, his beloved dog. We're very sorry for your loss, Alejandro; he was clearly a very happy, very good boy.

– Greg, Eric, and Mike

I always rolled my eyes the slightest bit when people referred to a pet as their best friend…and then Charlie became my best friend. I just want to share something silly that I found remarkable about him: one, like me, he was Puerto Rican (his favorite food was rice and beans), but after spending most of his life in New York City he still only understood Spanish; and two, although he loved every person he ever met, especially kids and babies, he harbored a murderous aggressiveness toward dogs and other strange animals (likely because he was freshly injured in a dog attack as a stray when he entered our lives). Yet despite those two things, in his final few years the old man picked up a little English (hearing me tell my American wife I was taking him for a walk) and learned to befriend her two cats. Old dog, incredible new tricks. "Of my friend, I can only say this: of all the souls I have encountered in my travels, his was the most human."

– Alejandro

CROSS-TEMPORAL COMMUNICATION
ENERGY EXPENDITURE CRITICAL
__SESSION ENDS__

Rest is a tool.
Any tool can also be a weapon.

Koan 199

Scrolls of the Cassandras

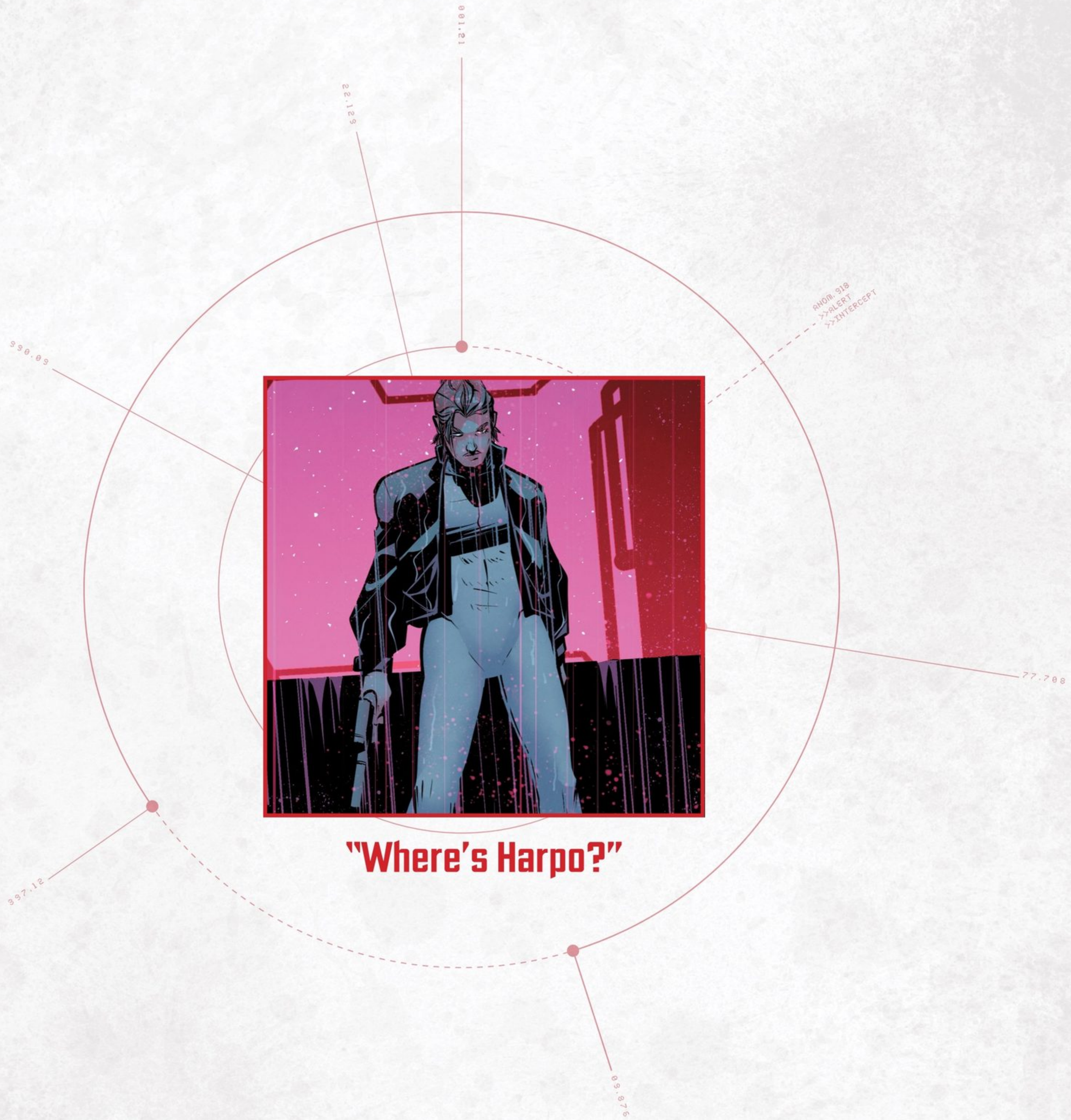
NEXT ISSUE:

Vic and her squad are joined by Forged Teams Viper and Scythe as the Empire opens a new front in the war against the Phobes — but what mysteries await within the darkness of the Skull Nebula?

APRIL 24, 2024

image

HENDERSON '23



"Where's Harpo?"

Adventure / SciFi / Space Opera

RATED M / MATURE

ZONE